

FALSE POSITIVES

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Let's begin with this. I personally don't care *how* someone trains a dog, provided they meet the following criteria:

1. They do no harm to the dog.
2. They are easy for the owner to understand and provide techniques that are easy to emulate.
3. They provide solid results in real world settings in a reasonable amount of time.
 - Chain collar and six foot lead? No problem.
 - Remote collar? No problem.
 - Clicker and treats? No problem.
 - Blade of timothy grass while humming "Rollercoaster of Love"? Is the dog trained? Then no problem.

I *do* have a problem with ineffective training being sold under the double banner of scientific integrity and ethical superiority. Look anywhere for dog training information and dog training businesses, and you will see a recurring and very misleading term: "positive".

Most of the time it is in the context of the particular trainer's philosophy: "positive" in this parlance denotes "kindness". It also implies that anyone who does not identify with (or at least advertise with) the term "positive" is somehow *unkind*. When one follows politics in a more general sense, one hears a lot about certain groups or individuals "stealing" the language. Don't be surprised that the same phenomenon has occurred in the niche of dog training, too. Hence we have slogans such as "Don't train with pain!" and "Force is not necessary" and the endless use of the "P" word to separate out these trainers from the rest of us, who by the process of elimination, must be a bunch of hairy-knuckled dog beaters.

So, what *is* "positive dog training", anyway?

The origin of the term stems from the philosophy of radical behaviorism made popular by B. F. Skinner in the middle part of the twentieth century. A type of learning theory called "operant conditioning" is at the root of it. Skinner broke down the behavioral responses of any living organism, from lab mice to humans, into four quadrants. According to the concept of operant conditioning, anything an organism does is in response to or in solicitation of Positive Reinforcement, Positive Punishment, Negative Reinforcement, or Negative Punishment. Using the definitions as intended, "positive" and "negative" are not value judgments meaning "good" and "bad", or "kind" and "cruel". They simply mean "to add" and "to subtract".

So, **positive reinforcement** means that you **add** something that makes the behavior **continue**, like a dog cookie.

Positive punishment means that you **add** something that makes the behavior **decrease** or stop, like a squirt from a plant mister.

Negative reinforcement means that you **subtract** something whose desired absence makes the behavior **continue**, like pressure from a collar or head halter.

Negative punishment means you **subtract** something whose *undesired* absence will **decrease** the behavior, like attention.

If you have been alive for more than a few hours, you will realize that as an organism, you are exposed to all four of these quadrants every day and you respond to them accordingly. You will also realize that the cute little organism you call your dog also responds to all four. More importantly, you will notice that both you *and* your dog often do things that make no sense when interpreted through this very limited filter. Alas, there is no room in the Skinnerean universe for concepts like “in spite of”, or “for the hell of it” or “regardless”. Just four boxes, and four ways to act.

The modern “positive” dog trainer will insist that they stay in only one of these four boxes. They use use positive reinforcement *only*. If this is true, then they will not ever tell you to put a leash on your dog (negative reinforcement), make a noise at your dog (although they eschew the evil “NO”, they will often encourage all manner of hisses, “ehhhs”, and “excuse me’s”, which fall under the category of positive punishment), or ignore your dog (negative punishment). Even the most diehard “positive only” trainer would admit that they must use a leash when working with a dog in anything other than a small room (research the concept of the Skinner box for elaboration), and will usually encourage ignoring the dog’s less desirable behaviors as a way of extinguishing them. And most will let a tortured “ehhh-ehhh” escape when the dog errs in his ways. This is why I chose to use the plant mister as my example of a positive punisher above. I have had several students who went to a self-described “positive reinforcement only” trainer who recommended the mister; clearly a violation of her own dogma.

So what exactly *do* they mean, since they have such a tenuous grasp of the scientific theory they invoke as being superior to more balanced methods?

They mean that what they do is going to make them, and hopefully you and your dog, *feel* good. They are conflating the term “positive” in its “good/humane/kind” context with “positive” in its correct context when discussing behaviorism, if one is going to insist on taking their embrace of this alleged science seriously.

Now you know what a “positive” trainer does. Sort of. But you’d be well advised to pay attention to the things they say they *don’t* do, also. Many soi-disant “positive” dog trainers make a big deal about their lack of “force” in training. You will see emphatic statements about their refusal to train with chain collars, prong collars, electronic collars or anything that could fall under the rubric of “physical punishment”. However, you will also see that one of their favorite tools is a head halter: a device that wraps around your dog’s head and upper neck like a horse’s halter. How the use of this piece escapes the definition of “force” is a riddle for the ages. The tool definitely has its place with some dogs, but of all of the common training devices available to the modern dog owner, it ranks highest in terms of pure force: after all, it controls your dog by putting massive amounts of torque on his nose and neck should he step out of position. Need more convincing? Ask your friend to lead you by the arm (comparable to your average dog’s neck, and the normal place for making casual contact for our species, just like the dog’s neck is how his mother carries him and his friend wrestles with him). Now ask him to lead you by the nose. Which leaves you feeling more coerced?

That's what I thought.

Yet, that very same principle of extreme leverage which convinces the dog through implied or actual force to go with you peacefully is embraced by those who would have you believe that they have received a special blessing from St. Francis as being "positive".

Another common claim of dog trainers who espouse the "positive" philosophy is that the use of punishment or force will create so much fear in your dog that he will become aggressive. Well, yes, if your concept of punishment is beating the dog mercilessly while bellowing in his face, I suppose you might have a problem down the road if Bosco decides to stick up for himself some day. But if you are a professional dog trainer and you are confusing the term "punishment" in this sense with the scientific term "punishment", then you are either half an idiot or you are deliberately misleading your students. If a positive trainer of this mindset tells me that a suitable way to cure jumping up is to turn my back on and ignore the offending dog, I revel in the fact that they have just described a textbook example of **negative punishment**. I act appalled that they would encourage me to create fear in my dog, after all, they are telling me to *punish* him. Even more egregious are the promoters of squirt bottles, shaker cans, and "ehhh-ehhh"s: they are using the even more undesirable **positive punishment** each and every time. Just because their actions are usually ineffective and leave you with an even more confused dog doesn't change their definition. And of course they can claim that "punishment doesn't work", because why would it, when they use it in such an incoherent and sloppy mode?

Truth be told, about 75% of my current and recent students have already been to prominent positive reinforcement trainers and "behaviorists" and have brought me dogs who are out of control with problems up to and including aggression toward humans and other dogs. While some of them had these issues when first consulting their past trainer, most saw the issues *develop and intensify* as they worked through the programs offered by my "positive" colleagues. Could it be that *their* methodology is likely to cause an increase in aggression, perhaps based on the lack of clarity which results from only giving the dog part of the information? Heresy! In today's training culture, you're not even allowed to *think* that.

While it's certainly easy to find fault with the cult of false positives, I don't enjoy it anywhere near as much as one might deduce from reading my work. Knowing how to use rewards effectively is of paramount importance to any trainer, and I have learned many good things about timing and learning theory from the positive-only school of thought. I wish that it was simply enough for them to advertise their services without "going negative" about anyone who doesn't subscribe to their belief system, or who dares to question its effectiveness. But when the dog owner is allowed to decide for himself, based on results alone, he almost never chooses the way that is more difficult to master and which takes many times longer to take effect, if it takes effect at all. The average dog owner also figures out that his dog is not learning to think, he is only being conditioned to respond. And we have robbed the dog of one of life's most precious gifts to a thinking creature: the opportunity to learn from the consequences of his actions. I think it's fairer to provide some of those consequences for my dog in a way that never harms him but that is immediately understood, and therefore more humane than the endless guessing games and ambivalence of what constitutes much of the "positive" brand of training. If its evangelists would practice what they preach and simply ignore what they don't like (balanced, results-oriented training) then I wouldn't find it so necessary to call their own contradictions and hypocrisies out for all to view. But those of us who train outside of the politically correct paradigm are sick of being accused of animal abuse or outright pigheaded stupidity by these allegedly "positive" types. And so some of us are finally speaking up about it. You and your dog deserve to know the truth.